Common Sense on Cyberbullying

Some Facts

- Approximately 20 percent of kids ages 10 to 18 say they have been cyberbullied sometime in their life (Cyberbullying Research Center, Hinduja and Patchin, 2010)

- About one in five teens ages 11 to 18 have admitted to cyberbullying others (Cyberbullying Research Center, Hinduja and Patchin, 2009)

- Teens ages 14 to 17 experience the most instances of online harassment and bullying (Pew Internet and American Life, 2007)

What's the Issue?

Cyberbullying is the use of digital media tools, such as the Internet and cell phones, to deliberately humiliate and harass others, oftentimes repeatedly. Though most teens do not do this, those who do are often motivated by a desire for power, status, and attention – and their targets are often people they are competing with for social standing. Cyberbullies often take advantage of the Web's anonymity to antagonize someone without being recognized.

Cyberbullying can take a variety of forms, such as harassing someone, impersonating someone, spreading rumors, or forwarding embarrassing information about a person. A bully's mean-spirited comments can spread widely through instant messaging (IM), phone texting, and by posts on social networking sites. This can happen rapidly, with little time for teens to cool down between responses. And it can happen anytime — at school or at home — and oftentimes it involves large groups of teens.

Why It Matters

Cyberbullying is similar to face-to-face bullying, but online tools magnify the hurt, humiliation, and social drama in a very public way. Whether it's creating a fake Facebook or MySpace page to impersonate a fellow student, repeatedly sending hurtful text messages and images, or spreading rumors or posting cruel comments on the Internet, cyberbullying can result in severe emotional and even physical harm.

And though anyone can spot bullying behavior in the real world, it's much more difficult to detect it in the online world. Sometimes an entire social circle will get involved, and then it becomes harder for an individual teen to disengage from it. In fact, whole groups of teens may be actively or passively participating, and the target can feel that it is impossible to get away from the bullies. In addition, hurtful information posted on the Internet is extremely difficult to remove, and millions of people can see it.

The following tips can help you recognize the warning signs of cyberbullying and serve as a guide for talking to your teens about preventing it.

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- **Recognize context.** Cyberbullying is often not thought of as "cyberbullying" to the teens involved. Even though an incident has a history, a story, and nuance, rather than referring it as "cyberbullying," try the words "digital cruelty," "abuse," or "being mean" online.

- **Help teens understand when behavior crosses the line.** Help your teen tune into his or her own feelings. If they feel emotionally or physically scared, it's time to get help.

- **Encourage empathy.** Help teens understand the detrimental impact of cyberbullying on people who are targeted, now and later in life. Encourage them to listen to targets and to become their allies.

- **Be realistic.** Teens have their own social dynamics that often don't include parents, so helping them directly may be difficult. Encourage teens to find friends or other trusted adults to help them through the situation, even if it's not you. Websites are often slow to respond, if they respond at all, but reporting an incident to a website administrator can be an empowering step.

- **Remember that your teen might be the bully.** Teens can take different roles in cyberbullying at different times. A teen who is cyberbullied might turn around and cyberbully someone else to feel powerful again. Ask questions to understand what role or roles your teens are playing.

- **Tell them to disengage.** Encourage your teens to ignore and block the bully, and even log off the computer for a while. Point out that cyberbullies are often just looking for attention and status, so don't let them know that their efforts have worked.

Families Can Talk About It

- *You seem down. What's going on at school? Is anything upsetting happening online?*

- *I'm here for you and so are your friends. Talk to me anytime.*

- *Are there any teachers at school who have dealt with these kinds of situations before? I think you should tell one of them about what's been happening.*

- *Bullies want attention, power, and status, which explains why they need to cause drama.*

- *I saw a news story about a teen who was bullied online. What would you do in that situation?*

Common Sense on
Risky Online Relationships

Some Facts

- Of the 13 percent of kids ages 10 to 17 who receive unwanted solicitations online, most ignore the messages or leave the site (Crimes Against Children Research Center, 2006).

- Teens are more likely to be solicited in a chat room or through instant messaging than on a social network site (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008).

- Most online sexual solicitors of teens are other teens, not adults (Internet Safety Technical Task Force, 2008).

- Ten percent of teens have admitted to feeling uncomfortable or scared because of an interaction with a stranger online (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

What's the Issue?

"Online predatory behavior," as it is commonly known, is when adults contact kids or teens over the Internet in an attempt to "groom" them for inappropriate sexual relationships. Many experts, however, have found that the more realistic threat for teens online is actually "online sexual solicitation." This means encouraging someone to talk about sex, give personal sexual information, or send sexual photos or video. (It does not always mean asking for sex.) For instance, teens might receive inappropriate requests or messages from strangers or acquaintances. However, contrary to popular belief:

- Teens (ages 13 to 17) are more at risk for online solicitations than "tweens" or children

- The majority of online solicitations come from teens themselves, or from young adults (ages 18 to 25)

- Adults that solicit teens are usually up-front about their true age and intentions (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011).

Why It Matters

When teens are led astray about what to look out for online, they can find themselves in unhealthy situations without realizing it. The allure of these kinds of relationships is not surprising, particularly for teens who are already vulnerable. Solicitors can provide teens with a boost of self-esteem with compliments and attention. And once teens engage in these relationships, they might agree to do things they would not normally do because of the imbalance in power between them and the solicitor. It is often not until much later that they realize that they were being manipulated.

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Teach your teen not to flirt with people they don't know. Your teen should understand that face-to-face flirting with peers is normal, but flirting with strangers or acquaintances online is risky – no matter how old they are – because the exchange can move from harmless to unhealthy very quickly. Flirting may seem like an invitation to solicitors, and lead to unwanted exposure to sexual topics or requests. It may also lead a teen to believe that they are in a serious, romantic relationship with someone they don't really know. Both situations can make a teen feel harassed, manipulated, or uncomfortable.

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Common Sense on
Risky Online Relationships

- **Make sure your teen feels safe telling a trusted adult.** If something creepy or inappropriate happens, teens need to know they will not get in trouble if they tell you or another trusted adult about it.

- **Talk to your teen about healthy relationships.** It can be difficult for some teens to recognize when others are manipulating them, especially those teens that want to experiment or prove that they are mature. Discuss which factors make relationships healthy, and why teens should not compromise on these values.

- **Look for warning signs.** Does your teen seem withdrawn, spend endless hours online, or appear to be hiding something? Teens who wind up in inappropriate online relationships often show these warning signs. If you think this might be happening, ask your teen about it.

Sources

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Common Sense on Privacy and Digital Footprints

Some Facts

- 80 percent of teens ages 15 to 18 feel their friends share too much information online (Common Sense Media, 2010)

- 65 percent of teens ages 15 to 18 think their personal information is private online (Common Sense Media, 2010)

- Nearly 80 percent of teens who are on social networks protect their profile by using some type of privacy setting (Computer Associates, 2009)

What's the Issue?

Our teens live in a culture of sharing that has forever changed the concept of privacy. In a world where everyone is connected and anything created online can be copied, pasted, and sent to thousands of people in a heartbeat, privacy starts to mean something different than simply guarding personal or private information. Each time your teen fills out a profile without privacy controls, comments on something, posts a video, or sends a picture of themselves to friends, they potentially broadcast themselves to the world.

Why It Matters

Digital life is both public and permanent. Everything our teens do online creates digital footprints that migrate and persist. Something that happens on the spur of the moment – a funny picture, an angry post – can resurface years later. And if teens aren't careful, their reputations can be harmed. Your teen may think he or she just sent something to a friend, but that friend can send it to a friend's friend, who can send it to their friends' friends, and so on. That's how secrets become headlines, and how false information spreads fast and furiously. The stakes only increase when we remember that all of this takes place in front of a huge, invisible audience. Teens' deepest secrets can be shared with thousands of people they've never even met.

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- **Help teens think long term.** Explain to teens that everything leaves a digital footprint with information that can be searched and passed along to thousands of people. Others can pass on that information too, so if they don't want to see something tomorrow, they'd better not post it today.

- **Teach teens to keep personal information private.** Help teens define which information is important for them to keep private when they're online. To start, we recommend that teens not share their addresses, phone numbers, or birth dates.

- **Make sure your teens use privacy settings on their social network pages.** Encourage teens to think carefully about the nature of their relationships (close friends, family, acquaintances, strangers) and adjust their privacy settings accordingly.

Common Sense on Privacy and Digital Footprints

- **Remind teens to protect their friends' privacy.** Passing along a rumor or identifying someone in a picture (called "tagging") affects other people's privacy. If your teen is uncomfortable being tagged in friends' photos, they can ask to have the photos or the tags removed. But beyond that, there's not too much they can do. So teach your teen that it's better to check with friends first before posting something about them.

- **Remind teens that the Golden Rule applies online.** While teens don't always have control over what other people post of them, they can be proactive and help guide which snapshots of their lives are taken in the first place. What goes around comes around. If teens spread a rumor or talk badly about a teacher, they can't assume that what they post will stay private. Whatever negative things they say can and probably will come back to haunt them, in more ways than they can imagine.

Families Can Talk About It

- *Do you really want everyone to know that about you?*
- *Think about what parents of your friends might think of you if they saw that.*
- *How do you think that person would feel if he/she later saw it someday?*